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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects of eight sessions of classroom instruction on the ability of adult learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) to produce Wh- questions orally. Preliminary assessment of the students' writing samples enabled classification of two groups: "proficient" (n=6), consistently able to produce written samples of Wh- questions with subject-verb inversion; and "non-proficient" (n=5), who had not attained this stage. Comparison of pretest and post-test oral scores found that neither group improved in grammatical accuracy of these interrogatives. The "proficient" group had been expected to show statistically significant improvement. However, the instruction was effective in increasing students' oral readiness to produce these questions. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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THE EFFECTS OF FORMAL INSTRUCTION ON THE ORAL PRODUCTION OF WH QUESTIONS BY ADULT ESL STUDENTS

by

THOMAS A. CARNEY

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This is a research paper submitted for CIEE 609/610, Research in Education I & II, to Prof. Rochelle G. Kaplan, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters Degree In Education at William Paterson College.

1995

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Abstract

THE EFFECTS OF FORMAL INSTRUCTION ON THE
ORAL PRODUCTION OF WH QUESTIONS BY ADULT ESL STUDENTS

by

Thomas A. Carney

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This study involved the effects that eight sessions of classroom instruction had on the ability of adult learners of English to orally produce WH questions. A preliminary assessment of the class' writing samples enabled the classification of two groups; the "proficient" group comprised six subjects who were consistently able to produce written samples of WH questions with subject-verb inversion, and five subjects with the lowest scores constituted the "non-proficient" group, who were assessed as not having attained this developmental stage.

Findings based on comparisons of pretest and posttest oral scores found that neither group improved in grammatical accuracy of these interrogative types. The "proficient" group was expected to demonstrate

a statistically significant improvement in this regard, so the first hypothesis was not supported.

The second hypothesis, which was concerned with the quantitative increases that both groups were expected to demonstrate, was supported by the findings. Results appear to indicate that the type of instruction that was utilized failed to increase the grammatical accuracy of these specific syntactical structures (WH questions). The findings of the study indicate, however, that the instruction was effective in increasing the oral readiness of the subjects to produce these types of interrogatives.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Overview

When students ask questions, they dramatically increase their opportunity to learn. Although there is a general consensus among educators regarding the logic of this statement, failure by students of English as a Second Language (ESL) to form questions remains a serious obstacle in their ability to communicate effectively, both inside and outside the classroom. Teachers of ESL often do not deal directly with the fact that the ability of students in composing sentences in written form does not necessarily transfer over to spontaneous production. This is a particular problem in the formation of interrogatives, whose oral production often lags behind written production in both frequency and quality.

When ESL learners do not form oral interrogatives in classroom settings, it is of course natural for the instructors to assume that their students have no questions to ask. Educators are becoming increasingly aware, however, that in situations involving limited English proficient (LEP) students, cultural factors may contribute to their reluctance in asking

questions. For example, Chamot and O'Malley (1992) in their chapter on the Cognitive Academic Language Approach, indicate the importance of the role of question asking on the part of LEP students as a vital part of an overall framework for socio-linguistic competence. Such new insights into teaching show that all students can benefit when they cease to play the role of mere respondents and can contribute to the learning environment by expressing themselves in a very obvious and fundamental way - by admitting and satisfying their needs for information and/or clarification. Similarly the importance of asking the "right" question at the "right" time outside the classroom should not be underestimated. Hopefully, the new emphasis being placed on this aspect of communication will assist the ESL learners both in their overall academic success and in their day-to-day activities.

Review of the Literature

Because the ability on the part of adult ESL students to produce oral questions spontaneously requires a proactive stance on the part of the instructor, studies regarding the effects of formal instruction are pertinent to this issue. Recent studies on interrogative production have

stressed the role of their acquisitional order.

Effects of Formal Instruction on Second Language Acquisition

There has been and continues to be considerable debate on the effect of classroom instruction on second language acquisition. One of the earlier studies (Pica, 1983) involved 18 adult learners of English who were divided into three groups; the first group learned English by way of classroom instruction only, the second group learned English in a "naturalistic" setting (informally, outside a classroom setting) and the third group received a combination of classroom instruction and "naturalistic" input. Although the researcher found from her study that there were definite similarities in the learning processes of the three groups, in her analysis of their target-like use of the morpheme "-s" she found significant difference between the groups. The instruction-only group outperformed the other two groups in consistently supplying both plural "-s" and third person singular "-s" in obligatory contexts (e.g., boys and girls; he likes). The conclusion was that instruction does have a positive effect on certain, specific aspects of oral language

production.

Pienemann (1984) conducted a study which involved the use of inversion. The subjects of this study were 10 children learning German, a language that unlike English, uses inversion in declarative sentences on a regular basis (e.g., "then has she again the book brought" instead of the English language order, "then she has brought the book again"). It was found that by providing formal instruction to the subjects who were "ready" for the new material (i.e., they were already at the threshold of this developmental stage) several months of learning under "naturalistic" conditions could be accelerated into a 2-week tutored program. This study therefore supported other research that maintains the position that formal instruction produces the most efficient learning of a second language, provided that the subjects are at the level where they can benefit from this instruction.

At about the same time as the Pienemann study, other researchers were trying to ascertain whether or not a communicative approach was the best way to teach English to nonnative speakers. An extensive study was conducted in India (Beretta and

Davies, 1984) that examined both a structuralized, formal approach (control groups) and an approach based solely on focus-on-meaning (the Communicational Teaching Project or CTP, which constituted the experimental groups). In order to avoid test bias that could favorably reflect on one approach over the other, five different assessments were administered: a structure test, a contextualized grammar test, a dictation test, a listening/reading comprehension test, and a task-based test. The subjects were students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in four different schools in India (the precise number of subjects is not listed in the study). Because the students in the focus-on-meaning groups scored significantly higher at one school on the dictation test, and a similar group at another school scored significantly higher on the contextualized grammar test, the authors concluded that there was tentative support for the effectiveness of English language instruction which focused entirely on meaning. They explained that, of the five tests administered, only these two demonstrated any differences between the instructional methods.

The study cited above is only one of many that view the teaching methods used in the instruction of English to nonnative speakers as a dichotomy: either the instruction consists of structural grading, error correction and explicit grammar explanation (i.e., formal instruction), or the methods focus on meaning and learning through natural processes (i.e., programs of instruction that are "communicatively based").

One subsequent study (Spada, 1987) went a step further; instead of merely trying to measure the effects of formal instruction in comparison to methods that favor a communicative approach, this author divided her subjects (48 adult ESL students) into three groups. The first group (class A) received English language instruction by means of activities that were "form-based." The second group (class B) was exposed to activities that were both "form-based" and "meaning-based." The third group (class C) received instruction that was entirely "meaning-based."

The results of this study demonstrated that the "form-based" group (class A) did not perform as well as either class B or class C on the post-

tests. What was surprising about this study, however, was the inclusion of this middle group, class B, which received both kinds of instruction, "form-based" and "meaning-based;" this group outperformed class C on the discourse posttest, indicating that the most effective approach to English language instruction might be one that incorporates both formal instruction methods and communicative methods.

Because this study appears to superficially support the case against formal instruction (it actually shows that focus on form can be effective when used in conjunction with instruction emphasizing focus on meaning), the study was not indicated in the critique of a prominent educator in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL).

VanPatten (1988), in his critique of previous studies that had supported the positive effect that formal instruction has in ESL learning, asserted that those findings had been incorrectly interpreted. He maintains that, in fact, when these studies are closely examined, they demonstrate that students who have acquired English through focus-on-form methods only seem to outperform their naturalistic

counterparts because of serious flaws in the studies. In particular, VanPatten criticizes Pica's study (1983) which had maintained that the suppliance of final "-s" in the students' oral production indicated the effectiveness of formal instruction. VanPatten argues that the subjects Pica had used, although all native Spanish speakers, came from different dialect groups. The subjects who underwent the formal instruction were Mexican, and in Mexican Spanish the tendency is to oversupply final "-s," but never to delete it. The subjects who learned English in the naturalistic setting were all of Caribbean origin, and in Caribbean Spanish the tendency is to delete final "-s."

At the same time that VanPatten proposed these criticisms of formal approaches to language insruction, Tomasello and Herron (1988) were taking a somewhat different direction in their research. They proposed that formal instruction could indeed be beneficial, but only when students first attended to errors. In their study of 39 university level American students of French, subjects were actually induced to make errors ("having been led down the

garden path"), after which error correction by the instructor immediately took place. The authors found that this technique had positive effects on students' learning of the grammatical structure of the target language.

Spada and a colleague conducted another study (Lightbown & Spada, 1990) which examined how well students learn English in an instructional environment in which focus on form is accompanied by focus on meaning. This study investigated the accuracy and overall performance of over 1,000 French Canadian students in intensive English as a Foreign Language classes and over 200 French Canadian students in regular English as a Foreign Language classes. The authors concluded that, despite the effectiveness of the communicative approach in most areas of language acquisition, instructional intervention is probably essential for the development and improvement of certain components of language.

The role of naturalistic and communicative approaches to language learning in relation to the promotion of spontaneous production of questions on the part of EFL or ESL learners was examined in the next two studies.

One study concerns how native English speakers change their style of speaking when conversing with nonnative English speakers (Long, 1981) and demonstrated some inadequacies of the naturalistic approach. This study contained 36 subjects, 24 of whom were native English speakers and 12 of whom were identified as students of English as a second language. The study examined the supposed benefit for learners of English to engage in conversation in naturalistic settings with the opportunity for ample and comprehensive input. However, as this study showed, the native English speakers who were reported to have formed grammatically correct questions 82 per cent of the time when conversing with other native English speakers did so only 63 per cent of the time when conversing with nonnative speakers. Native speakers as a whole formed WH questions (i.e., questions beginning with the words "who," "what," "where," "when," and "why") with inversion only 33 per cent of the time when forming interrogatives that were addressed to nonnative speakers. Although the reason for this nonstandard speech style was to attempt to "lighten the nonnative speaker's burden" it did very little to help the English language learners

in their own oral production of questions. If anything, it probably confused the learner, who, when given the opportunity to ask a question (which was rare) mostly imitated the native speaker's incorrect syntax. As Long indicated, "NNS's (non-native speakers) asked few questions, but of the total of 185 in the entire corpus, 148 (80 per cent) were of the uninverted form." (p. 151)

A more recent study (Dolly, 1990) demonstrates that even in a communicatively oriented program that involved interactive writing between 12 university students of English as a Second Language and their teacher, the students as a whole used questions only 2.3 per cent of the time in extending a topic. This compares with 14.8 per cent of the time for the teacher. The author states "The infrequency of the student solicits does not necessarily suggest that (nonnative speakers) hesitate to pose questions." (p. 319) However, although the author did not say so, the study does not indicate that even when the target language is in written form are students able to produce spontaneous questions.

One of the early studies (Ellis, 1984) on the impact of formal instruction on the oral production

of WH questions recognized the need to understand the internal factors of the second language learner. This study, with 13 ESL students between 11 and 15 years of age, examined the effects of 3 hours of instruction with varying amounts of practice time in listening and and oral production. The instruction consisted of teaching the words "who," "what," "where" and "when," their correct position in an interrogative sentence, and the inverted subject-verb order.

After instruction and practice, the students were given an oral elicitation assessment. The results were uneven, and as Ellis pointed out, the amount of practice time the individual students had did not correlate positively with their performance; surprisingly, the students who had the least practice scored the highest.

Ellis made it clear that there was an acquisitional order among the WH interrogatives. In this order the first to be acquired are "who" and "what;" Later, "where" and then finally "when" is acquired (the lexical item "why" was not included in the study). Due to the fact that the largest discrepancy is with the scoring of the "when" elicitations, with the students with the least practice outperforming

the others, Ellis theorized that the cause might very well be the fact that these particular students were at the stage in which they could benefit from the instruction. Although formal instruction helped them, no amount of instruction or even practice of "when" interrogatives could have benefited the other students; they simply had not yet attained that developmental stage.

One more study on the subject of learning environments and interrogative production will illustrate that a truly comprehensive understanding of this topic entails the concept that an acquisitional sequence may exist among the various types of interrogatives, which is a related but distinct issue.

In order to verify whether or not differences exist in the acquisition order of English interrogatives among elementary and secondary school Chinese students, Tang (1991) conducted a study involving 135 subjects. The study was an ex post facto comparative analysis between three schools that differed in teaching methods (similar to Spada's three group study of 1987). One school stressed formal EFL instruction, another school

taught EFL in a "mixed" environment and the third school taught EFL using a somewhat more "focus on meaning" approach, with the added advantage that English was the medium of instruction for all the courses in the school, as well as for the extra-curricular activities.

Tang found no significant differences between the three schools as far as acquisition order: the ability to form "yes-no" questions preceded the production of WH questions, whether in written form or orally, provided that the assessments were timed. Because there was no significant difference between the schools, Tang maintained that different learning environments do not affect the acquisition order of the different types of interrogatives.

However, production of WH questions by the subjects generally did precede that of "yes/no" questions when the tests were untimed. This was an interesting finding in that on these untimed tests, when the EFI learners had the opportunity to think analytically on the syntax, they were able to override the influence of their own native language, Chinese, which does not preposition their equivalents to the WH words.

From these studies contrasting the different learning environments one can see that formal instruction can impact on the learning of English interrogative formation and their oral production. That is not to say, of course, that other methods of instruction have no effect. If, however, the sequence of syntax acquisition is not permeable to instruction insofar as oral production of interrogatives is concerned, then the question of when to teach (as opposed to how to teach) becomes crucial.

Acquisitional Sequence of Question Types

Like other syntactical structures, the formation of various forms of interrogatives may very well follow a natural sequence that cannot be altered through formal instruction. This does not mean, however, that one cannot successfully teach adult students of English how to form questions. This can be achieved, provided that the instructor is aware of the internal processes of the learners and is explained by the Teachability Hypothesis proposed by Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley (1988).

Before instruction can be helpful in the production of oral speech, certain "processing

prerequisites" need to be acquired by the learner. This position has a partial basis in one of Pienemann's earlier studies (1984). Although this specific research involved the learning of inversion in German, the authors maintain that the Teachability Hypothesis also applies to the acquisition of English, and especially to the formation of questions in English.

The authors devised a six-stage developmental plan through which language learners proceed (as adapted for Appendix A). In this developmental process, although formal language instruction can accelerate the rate of acquisition of a certain syntactical feature (as seen in Pienemann, 1984), it does not permit the learner to skip a stage.

As the WH question type (e.g., "What do they study?") is situated in stage 5, the learner who can form a stage 3 question (e.g., "Do you understand me?") will not, according to the Teachability Hypothesis, be able to acquire the ability to form stage 5 questions until first having acquired stage 4 question-forming ability (e.g., "Have you a car?").

The fact that some types of questions appear

to be acquired before other types, both in first language learning and second language learning, has been a topic of considerable interest among other researchers. An early study was conducted by Klima and Bellugi (1966) which involved only three subjects, children who were acquiring their first language, English. The authors concluded that even well after the subjects had mastered the oral production of "yes/no" questions (e.g., "Does the Kitty stand up?") the subjects were consistently unable to invert the subject/verb order in WH questions, as English grammatical rules require (e.g., typical production would have been "Why kitty can't stand up?")

The apparent inability of the subjects to form WH questions in correct form as early as the "yes/no" questions was accounted for by the relative complexity of the WH question: not only does this syntactical structure require subject/verb inversion, but the subjects would have had to accomplish this after remembering to preposition the WH word (called WH fronting). It seemed, therefore, only logical that students learn to ask questions like "Do you drive?" before they can learn "What do you drive?"

Two subsequent studies failed to sustain the finding that "yes/no" questions precede WH questions in oral production of first language learners of English. Hect and Morse (1974), who studied oral production of interrogatives by 12 children (all about 2 years 6 months of age) found that inversion in "yes/no" questions did not develop before inversion in WH questions. Ingram and Tyack (1979), who studied the spontaneous production of 21 children (between 2 and 4 years of age) also found that first language learners do not show a natural sequence for acquiring "yes/no" questions before WH questions after having examined their rates of subject/verb inversion.

Another study involving this particular acquisition sequence among adult second language learners of English was carried out by Eckman, Moravcsik and Wirth (1989). Special emphasis was placed on which type of question would be acquired first: the "yes/no" question or the WH question. Of the 14 subjects who were studied, all but one demonstrated that the acquisition sequence was the following: WH fronting preceded the ability to invert WH questions but that inversion in WH

questions preceded inversion in the "yes/no" questions. Even though the authors noted that they could have expected the less complex "yes/no" questions to have been acquired first, it is informative to examine syntactically the questions that were formed by the subjects:

"Is Lou and Patty known each other?"
"Yesterday is Sue did drink two bottles of wine?"
"Does Joan working in the restaurant?"
"Sue does drink orange juice?" (p. 179)

By reviewing some of the "yes/no" questions elicited by the subjects, it is obvious that these types of formations present second language learners with a very fundamental problem involving how to start the question. The WH questions, on the other hand, provide a sort of anchor, a reference point, from which the individual can commence. Although apparently refuting the sequence implied in the six-stage developmental scheme of Pienemann et al., (1988) the authors did not call the evidence of their own study conclusive. What Eckman et al. did conclude is noteworthy: the need to avoid assuming certain preconceived notions of internal sequential orders that may not in fact exist. According to Eckman et al. (1989),

> If, on the other hand, there is no nonarbitrary threshold for establishing what it takes for a pattern to be systematic enough to amount to a rule, we need to abandon unqualified reference to the existence of rules and resort to statistical and relative concepts of existence. (p. 198)

Because the Teachability Hypothesis held so much promise in assisting in the formal instruction of questions for language learners, it is somewhat disconcerting to learn that the six-stage profile model to which it is linked proves so unreliable. If WH questions cannot be acquired until after "yes/no" questions are mastered, then the English language teacher's lesson plan sequence is obvious. If, on the other hand, there is no conclusive proof one way or the other, or even worse, if the sequential order may be just the reverse (as in Eckman et al., 1989), then the ESL teachers may feel free to provide formal instruction on WH questions regardless of their students' levels of proficiency in "yes/no" questions.

In a study on the sequence of verb tenses in second language learners (Buczowska and Weist, 1991) there was more evidence that the Teachability

Hypothesis did not hold. Sixty English language learners (university students) were compared to 60 American children (between the ages of 2 and 6). The results of the study showed that the tutored university ESL learners had acquired the past/future contrast at a relatively early stage. If the natural sequential order had been followed, say the authors, the university ESL students, despite the formal instruction they underwent, would have had to acquire progressive/simple distinction before past/future distinction.

The authors did not conclude that the Teachability Hypothesis was totally without basis. They suggested, nevertheless, that by looking at it from a somewhat different perspective, both this concept and recent studies on the subject could be better understood.

> Contrary to the Teachability Hypothesis, formal input can alter natural sequences, but in this case, the alteration may be attributed to the way the information is presented rather than when the information is presented. A weaker form of the Teachability Hypothesis might be proposed in which it is

simply claimed that natural sequences place constraints on pedagogical practices. (p. 535)

Summary of the Literature Review

Despite the findings by some studies (e.g., VanPatten, 1988) that the case for the effectiveness of formal instruction is at best inconclusive in the teaching of a second or foreign language, most evidence from research in this area appears to indicate otherwise. This research suggests that formal instruction may indeed be effective, especially when combined with a naturalistic approach (Spada, 1987). Other research has shown that formal instruction may even be indispensable at least for certain components of second language learning. (Lightbown and Spada, 1990).

The conclusions of most recent studies that support the positive role of formal instruction in ESL still maintain that there exists a so-called natural acquisitional order (Ellis, 1984). Later studies that focused specifically on the developmental stages of the various types of interrogatives further elaborate this sequential schema, that not having acquired the ability to produce one type of interrogative (e.g., "yes/no" questions) precludes

the successful acquisition of other types of questions, namely, the WH questions (Pienemann et al., 1988).

Closer examination of the sequential acquisition of question types, however, casts doubt on the inevitability of a natural order for this particular component of language (Eckman et al., 1989). Certain specific groups of ESL students may produce WH questions before yes/no questions, or vice versa, depending on the particular input to which the learners may have been exposed. Even if the natural order for the acquisition of WH questions appears to occur at a later stage than other types of interrogatives, this could perhaps only amount to a psychological constraint which could then be overcome by formal instruction (Buczowska et al., 1991).

Buczowska et al. (1991) state that the natural sequence of second language instruction can indeed be altered by formal instruction. Without refuting the Teachability Hypothesis altogether, they claim that a compromise hypothesis would more accurately describe the learning processes associated with second language acquisition. Given the importance that interrogative-forming ability is now deemed

to play in the overall sociolinguistic competence of LEP students (Chamot and O'Malley, 1992), the factors that contribute to the attainment of oral production of WH questions by ESL students is then still in need of further research.

CHAPTER II

Statement of the Problem

The use of formal instruction to prepare adult ESL students in the oral production of interrogatives may well be indispensable. A so-called naturalistic environment cannot be relied upon as an effective means for acquisition of question-forming ability. Unlike a classroom environment where the instructor can control the input for the learners so that they are exposed to enough correctly formed interrogatives to provide adequate modeling, this particular input is noticeably lacking in native-nonnative discourse. Also, by planning lessons that require oral question-forming on the part of the ESL students, the instructor can readily ascertain their level of proficiency in this area. The crucial point is that the focus should be on the oral production of interrogatives, as the ability to form various types of questions in written form cannot guarantee their automaticity in spontaneous utterances.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if formal instruction would significantly improve the oral production of WH questions (i.e., "who," "what,"

"where," "when," and "why" interrogatives) on the part of adult ESL students. Because previous research has been basically ambiguous about the effect that formal instruction has on the acquisition of these types of interrogatives, it was felt that an experimental study of this kind would provide more decisive insight into this subject.

Definition of Variables

WH Words

The most essential element in the formation of WH questions (or "open" questions, as they can elicit a number of possible responses as opposed to yes/no questions) is the presence and proper selection of one of the following lexical items as the first word in the sentence: "who," "what," "where," "when," and "why". Syntactical structures as "What are you saying?" are called "aux-2nd" sentences, as the auxiliary verb (in this case "are") is positioned second in the sentence.

Subject Verb Inversion

Although questions without inversion but with proper intonation are perfectly understood in English (in fact the WH word need not be prepositioned for rhetorical effect as well: "You said what?" in lieu

of "What did you say?"), consistent non-inverting by limited English proficient students may very well signify that the student has not yet reached the "aux-2nd" developmental stage of question-forming ability (stages illustrated in Appendix A).

Malformed Subject-Verb Inversion

A question like "Where is going the woman?" may appear to represent a serious flaw in the ESL learner's understanding of the syntactical formation of interrogatives. This production, either written or oral, does nonetheless demonstrate that inversion has begun to be acquired; the learner has yet to place the subject between the auxiliary verb and the main verb.

Inaccurately Formed Questions With Inversions

Learners who form questions like "When does she shopping?" are considered to have reached an advanced stage of WH question-forming ability ("aux-2nd"). Although the form is not correct grammatically, more formal instruction and oral practice was expected to correct these types of inaccuracies. Unlike in Ellis' study (1984), however, inaccurately formed questions in this study score one point lower than their

accurately formed counterparts.

Spontaneous vs. Elicited Questions

On the pretests and posttests, questions that were posed by students that were unprompted have been designated as "spontaneous." The "elicited" questions, on the other hand, were those samples of oral production that subjects were required to relate to specific "cue cards" that told of information that the subject, in his or her role as "reporter," needed to obtain from the personality.

Hypotheses

It was expected that two groups of adult ESL students who had been previously selected based on their writing samples would demonstrate different degrees of improvement in their oral production of certain interrogatives based on a period of formal instruction.

Hypothesis 1

It was hypothesized that following a period of formal instruction, adult ESL students who had been previously assessed as being able to form WH questions in their writing samples (the proficient group) would make more gains in the grammatical accuracy of their oral production of WH questions

compared to their classmates what had not yet attained this stage of development in their writing samples (the non-proficient group).

Hypothesis 2

It was hypothesized that both the proficient group and non-proficient group would make quantitative gains after this same period of formal instruction, with both groups producing more spontaneous questions on the posttest than on the pretest.

CHAPTER III

Methods

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 11 adult English as a second language (ESL) students who were among 25 students attending the same class at a night school that was established specifically for ESL instruction. The school is located in a small northern New Jersey city in a building that serves as a middle school during the day. Like the rest of the school, the students in this ESL class were adults ranging in age from their early 20's to their late 60's. The vast majority of the students were employed full-time (although there were also some housewives) who found this particular school to be convenient as classes are held only twice a week. Again, like the rest of the students in this adult ESL school, this class had representatives from a variety of countries; six were native Russian speakers from the former U.S.S.R., four were from Colombia, three were from Poland, another three were from the Dominican Republic, two were from Ecuador, two were from Brazil, and one representative each from the Philippines, Slovakia, India, Puerto Rico and Peru.

The selection of subjects was based on writing samples from all 25 students in the class. From these samples of WH questions the students with the nine highest and the nine lowest scores had been originally selected for the study in the Fall. Because of the substantial "drop out" rate (students who failed to return for the Spring semester) the total number of subjects was reduced to 11; the six remaining subjects with the highest scores constituted the "proficient" group: three native Russian speakers (two female, one male), two native Spanish speakers (both male) and one native Slovak speaker (female). The five remaining subjects among the lower scoring constituted the "non-proficient" group: three native Russian speakers (two female, one male) and two native Spanish speakers (one male, one female).

Materials

Materials for the written task consisted of three photographs and one drawing of content intended to evoke WH questions from the subjects. One photo depicted a man in a tuxedo serving champagne to penguins, another photo illustrated a supermarket shopping sequence (actually, nine "mini" photos in

one); the third photo showed a child covering his father's eyes while the father is holding up a package of bacon. The drawing showed a kitten looking at herself in a mirror. When these pictures were distributed to the subjects to obtain writing samples, a sheet of paper was also included with them, with the oral instructions given that the students were to compose two written questions for each picture. (The sheet already contained lines designated 1, 2 for each picture, which were designated, A, B, C, D to help clarify what was expected). Copies of these materials appear in Appendix B.

Oral responses were elicited through a pool of 12 magazine and newspaper photographs of famous and/or controversial persons from which subjects were to select one for conducting an "interview." The list of the particular characters in the photographs appears in Appendix C.

The subjects were asked to play the role of "reporter" and requested that any questions that they may have, to please direct them to their chosen personality; these samples were scored as "spontaneous," and the subjects were free to produce as few or as many as they felt they were able.

After the subject had finished with these "spontaneous" samples, he or she was then required to produce nine "elicited" samples, which corresponded to individual "cue cards" that prompted the subject to obtain specific information from the selected personality. List of cue card "prompts" appears in Appendix D.

Procedures

Preliminary Assessment

In order to assess the developmental stage of subjects regarding their ability to form WH questions, a writing sample test was first administered. The "packet" (described in the Materials section) was distributed to each of the 25 initial students in the class with the instruction that they were to attempt to write two questions for each picture. They were directed to write these interrogatives on the sheet of paper designated for this purpose. Subjects' responses were scored on a scale adapted from Ellis' study (1984), previously mentioned in Chapter I, with one modification; the scale used in this present study also gave points to yes/no questions, as the subjects for this study were not required to form interrogatives that were specifically of the WH question type.

Assessment Scale

5 Accurate WH question with inversion
(e.g., "Why does the child cover his father's eyes?")

4 Inaccurate WH question with inversion
(e.g., "Where did they went?")

3 Accurate "yes/no" question with inversion
(e.g., "Are they talking about the prices?")

3 WH question with malformed subject-verb inversion
(e.g., "Where is going the woman?")

2 WH question without inversion
(e.g., "Why the child is quiet?")

2 "Yes/no" question with malformed subject verb -verb inversion
(e.g., "Do bring they champagne?")

1 "Yes/no" question without inversion
(e.g., "The boy is looking for his mother?")

0 Non-production

Pretests

Once nine subjects had been selected for both "proficient" and "non-proficient" groups, they were then engaged in a mock interview which was designed to evoke WH questions. They were individually asked to play the role of "reporter" and to select among a display of 12 personalities to "interview." This session was audiotaped and all questions made by the subjects were transcribed for scoring.

After each subject was given ample opportunity to produce as many "spontaneous" questions as he or she was able, the test administrator then facilitated the interview process by holding up "cue cards" that revealed general topics about which questions could be formed. No specific questions were provided, however. The cue cards contained general topics, always prefaced with the phrase "We need to know...." and continuing with such phrases as ".....the time you get up in the morning", ".....the books you like to read" or ".....the place you lived as a child." Because these were prompted by the cue cards, they were scored separately as "elicited" questions.

Performance was scored for this task with the same assessment scale used for the preliminary writing scores. Although spontaneous scores could range

from a score as low as zero (nonproduction), each subject was required to produce exactly nine elicited responses so that an elicited score of zero was not possible. Scores were classified as 1.) elicited, 2.) spontaneous and a combined score of actual output disregarding any spontaneous zero scores, designated 3.) total oral.

Intervention Procedures

Eight sessions of one-half hour duration, totaling four hours, were allotted for the formal instruction. The instruction was entirely focused on improving the students' oral proficiency in producing the specific syntactical structures related to the study: WH questions. Charts demonstrating various formations of WH questions were utilized, with each session focusing on a different grammatical aspect of these interrogatives; in an effort to make the instruction both meaningful and purposeful, "topic orientation" was introduced at each session so that the students could readily connect the relevance of oral production of WH questions to their own personal communicative needs. In order to increase "verb recognition," photocopies of various scenes depicting different action words were distributed at each session, with the goal of

having the students themselves deduce the target vocabulary.

Posttests

Because many of the students failed to return for the Spring semester (as previously mentioned) the number of subjects for the proficient group was reduced from nine to six, and the number of subjects comprising the non-proficient group was reduced from nine to five.

Immediately following this period of formal classroom instruction, subjects were again given the oral test for assessment of their ability to form WH questions. The subjects were again individually asked to choose from an array of 12 famous and/or controversial persons. Subjects were scored both for their spontaneous and elicited samples.

CHAPTER IV

Results

Overview

Before any oral testing, it was necessary to perform a written assessment of the class' proficiency in forming interrogatives. The class was found to be appropriate for the study as there was a group of "high" scorers (originally the group with the nine highest scores, later reduced to six subjects) who had a mean average of 3.87 on the written test and a group of "low" scorers (originally the students with the nine lowest scores, later reduced to five subjects) who had a mean average of 2.50. These scores cannot be compared directly with the oral assessment scores that are mentioned next, as "yes/no" question formations were permitted on the written test, and received a lower score than the WH questions (see Methods for scale).

Oral samples of WH questions obtained from subjects prior to and after the period of instruction were scored for grammatical accuracy on a 5-point scale (1 - 5) for elicited samples and on a 6-point scale (0 - 5) for spontaneous samples. It was needed to include a 0 score for the spontaneous samples

to indicate non-production of questions. On the elicited samples, subjects were required to respond to nine cues. Therefore, the possible range of total scores on the elicited samples was from 9 - 45. The possible range of total scores on the spontaneous responses began with 0 and had no ceiling.

Mean scores were then calculated for each subject on elicited, spontaneous, and total accuracy scores. Means rather than totals were used because the number of spontaneous samples varied from subject to subject. Therefore, in order to give equal weight to the scores of each subject in the groups, the individual scores in each category were calculated to reflect the total point scores divided by the number of samples made in that category. So for example, if a subject's total score on elicited questions was 35, that score was then divided by 9 (the number of samples made) to obtain a mean elicited score of 3.89. Similarly, if a subject made two spontaneous samples and had a total score of 10, that subject's mean spontaneous score was 5. Mean total scores were obtained in the same way, using the number of both kinds of questions combined. So for example, if a

subject had made 9 elicited samples and 2 spontaneous samples and had a total score of 45, that subject's mean total score was 45 divided by 11 or 4.09. Group mean scores were then tabulated by summing the mean scores of subjects in each group (proficient and non-proficient).

T-tests for related samples were used to determine whether differences between pre-intervention and post-intervention mean scores were statistically significant within each group on the following: elicited question production, spontaneous question production, and total oral question production.

Within each group comparisons were also made on the number of spontaneous questions produced at pre-intervention and post-intervention testing times. Chi square analyses were used to determine if the number of spontaneous questions produced after instruction was significantly greater than the number produced prior to instruction.

Analysis of Data

The Effect of Formal Instruction on the Accuracy of Oral Production of WH Questions

It was hypothesized that adult ESL students who had been assessed by their writing samples as

having attained the developmental stage which is characterized by the consistent ability to form syntactically correct WH questions would show significant improvement in the accuracy of the oral production of these types of structures after a period of formal instruction, whereas their classmates who had been assessed by their writing samples to have not yet attained this developmental stage would not benefit significantly by the same instruction.

As indicated in Table 1, for production of elicited interrogatives the proficient group obtained a mean score of 3.91 on the pretest and 4.14 on the posttest. The non-proficient group obtained a mean score of 2.68 on the pretest on the same category (production of elicited interrogatives) and a mean score of 3.02 on the posttest. Comparisons were made of pretest and posttest differences within each group using t-tests for related samples. The results of the analyses indicated that scores for both the proficient group and the non-proficient group were essentially the same for the pretest and posttest (for the proficient group, $t(10) = .658$, $p = .531$ and for the non-proficient group, $t(8) =$

Table 1

Pretest and Posttest Comparisons of Mean Average Scores of Elicited Samples

	Proficient Group	Non-Proficient Group
Pretest	3.91	2.68
Posttest	4.14	3.02
	$t(10) = .658$	$t(8) = .497$

.497, p= .636).

Comparisons were also made on the pretest scores and posttest scores for the category of spontaneous interrogative production for both groups. As indicated in Table 2, the proficient group obtained a mean score of 3.88 on the pretest and 3.89 on the posstest, whereas the non-proficient group obtained a mean score of 1.26 on the pretest and 2.91 on the posttest for the same category. Again, t-tests for related samples were used to compare the pretest and posttest scores for spontaneous accuracy within each group. For the proficient group the scores remained essentially the same ($t(10) = .009$, $p = .941$); for the non-proficient group, however, a significant difference between pre- and posttest scores was obtained ($t(8) = 2.346$, $p < .05$).

Finally, comparisons were made of pretest and posttest scores of the proficient and non-proficient groups in the category of total oral production. As shown in Table 3, the proficient group obtained a pretest mean score of 4.05 and a posttest mean of 4.03 in this category; the non-proficient group had a mean score of 2.69 on the pretest and achieved a mean score of 2.97 on the posttest. When t-tests

Table 2

Pretest and Posttest Comparisons of Mean Average Scores of Spontaneous Samples

	Proficient Group	Non-Proficient Group
Pretest	3.88	1.26
Posttest	3.89	2.91*
	t(10) = .009	t(8) = 2.346

*p < .05

Table 3

Pretest and Posttest Comparisons of Mean Scores for Total Oral Samples

	Proficient Group	Non-Proficient Group
Pretest	4.05	2.69
Posttest	4.03	2.97
	t (10) = -.057	t(8) = .445

for related samples were carried out within the two groups in this category, the analyses indicated no significant differences ($t(10) = -.057$, $p = .910$) for the proficient group, the only decrease in the study and likewise no significant difference for the non-proficient group ($t(8) = .445$, $p = .670$).

Thus, the hypothesis predicting greater improvement in accuracy of the formation of WH questions for proficient students compared to non-proficient students was not supported in any of the three categories of production investigation. Rather, contrary to predictions, the non-proficient group made more gains in the accuracy of production of spontaneous questions (although these gains were not statistically significant).

The Effect of Formal Instruction on the Quantity of WH Questions Formed

It was also hypothesized that both groups, the non-proficient as well as the proficient, would show a significant increase in the number of spontaneous interrogatives produced after instruction.

As indicated in Table 4, the proficient group produced 14 spontaneous questions on the pretest and 33 on the posttest; the non-proficient group produced 9 spontaneous questions on the pretest and

Table 4

Pretest and Posttest Comparisons of the Number of Spontaneous Samples Produced

	Proficient Group	Non-Proficient Group
Pretest	14	9
Posttest	33	17
	Chi square (1) = 7.68*	Chi square (1) = 2.46

*p < .01

17 spontaneous questions on the posttest. A comparison of these scores was made using a Chi square test. The results of the analyses indicate that there was a statistically significant increase in the number of spontaneous questions produced by the proficient group (Chi square (1) = 7.68, $p < .01$.) The non-proficient group, however, did not produce a significantly greater number of spontaneous questions after instruction (Chi square (1) = 2.46, $p = .113$). The findings, therefore, partially confirmed the hypothesis predicting an increase in spontaneous questions for both groups after instruction.

Summary of Results

Contrary to expectations, the results did not confirm the hypothesis concerning the improvement of grammatical accuracy for the proficient group. Scores for both groups, proficient and non-proficient, did not significantly improve, with the exception of the scores for the accuracy of the non-proficient group's production of spontaneous samples. This improvement was, however, offset by the total oral scores for this group, which, like the proficient group, showed no significant increase in accuracy.

Results did, however, confirm the second hypo-

thesis, relating to the increase in the number of spontaneous questions produced by both groups. The gains of the non-proficient group, however, were marginal compared to those of the proficient group. The proficient group demonstrated significant gains in this category, suggesting that the eight sessions of formal instruction facilitated the oral production of these specific syntactical structures that the subjects had already internalized.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Because of the apparent ineffectiveness of naturalistic approaches in promoting interrogative output on the part of adult ESL learners, it was expected that a period of formal instruction would significantly increase the subjects' overall oral proficiency in this area. The findings did not indicate any overall improvement, thereby challenging the first hypothesis. The findings did indicate improvement in the number of spontaneously produced interrogatives, however, thus supporting the second hypothesis, especially for the proficient group.

Hypothesis 1 - Effect of Formal Instruction on Grammatical Accuracy of WH Questions

The failure of either the proficient group or the non-proficient group to make any significant improvement in accuracy leaves Hypothesis 1 unsubstantiated. Because of the significant increase in the grammatical accuracy by the non-proficient group in the category of spontaneous questions, moreover, it would appear that the findings actually contradict this hypothesis, as the proficient group was expected to make more gains than the non-proficient group. A more realistic

appraisal would, however, take into account that two of the non-proficient subjects obtained scores of zero on the pretest in this category, rendering their group's score for spontaneous accuracy deceptively low. Scores for total oral proficiency, which were obtained only from mean averages of actual output, indicated no improvement in grammatical accuracy for either group.

Despite the lack of improvement in the grammatical accuracy of the subjects' oral production, these findings in and of themselves do not run counter to previous research. Ellis' study (1984) and Pienemann et al.'s research (1988) strongly suggest that if the study's findings would indicate any improvement, it would be significantly greater among the proficient subjects than the non-proficient subjects. Their studies did not imply that all kinds of formal instruction would be effective; although the material covered in the formal instruction of this study was exclusively focused on the oral production of WH questions, it was designed to increase the oral output of syntactical structures that had already been acquired, not to increase their grammatical accuracy.

Although the type of instruction that had been developed for this study rendered the success of obtaining positive results for Hypothesis 1 more difficult, inclusion of this hypothesis was considered indispensable; if the subjects succeeded in increasing the quantity of their WH questions while failing to maintain the previous degree of grammatical accuracy, then the net benefit of the formal instruction would be put in doubt. It was considered necessary to have these qualitative assessments made, both pretest and posttest, to assure that any quantitative improvement did not negatively impact on the subjects' oral production of these syntactical structures.

It is believed that the use of intense oral drilling of grammatical formations of WH questions, as well as written exercises by the students, would have significantly increased the grammatical accuracy of the subjects, especially those in the proficient group. These methods were unintentionally neglected in favor of techniques that were instead utilized to facilitate quantitative improvement.

Hypothesis 2 - The Effect of Formal Instruction on the Quantity of WH Questions

As expected, both groups increased the quantity of spontaneous questions, and the proficient group did so to a statistically significant degree. The lessons plans that had been designed took into account both cognitive and affective factors, with the subjects gaining a higher degree of familiarity with the oral production of WH questions and becoming more confident in their ability to form these types of interrogatives.

Keeping in mind findings from previous research, especially that of Spada (1987) and Lightbown and Spada (1990), instructional content and practices provided both focus-on-form and communicative opportunities for the students to enhance their readiness to orally produce specific syntactical structures (i.e., WH questions) that had been previously learned. Continuous and strenuous effort was maintained throughout the instructional period to ensure that the lessons were both meaningful and purposeful to all of the students, not just the subjects.

Two of the techniques utilized for this purpose were "topic orientation" and "verb recognition," and

from the results of the study both apparently succeeded in enhancing the subjects' oral readiness; by "topic orientation" is meant that at each instructional session practical, "real life" situations were introduced demonstrating to the students the essential ways by which oral proficiency of this syntactical structure would positively affect their personal communicative interactions (e.g., establishing identity: "Where are you from?", social politeness: "What kind would you like?", and problem solving: "What will they need now?", etc.) "Verb recognition" also played a large part of the instruction at every session, as it was thought that, once having acquired the ability to form even the most complex grammatical structures involving advanced WH questions, ESL learners' proficiency was still relatively lacking in their ability to identify specific verbs. Photocopies of pictures representing various types of verbs were abundantly distributed, with the students providing most of the oral output, and assisting each other in identifying the target vocabulary.

Because of previous research on the topic of of developmental stages, (e.g., Ellis, 1984 and Pienemann et al., 1988) it was not expected that the improvements made by the non-proficient group in their ability to increase the quantity of spontaneous questions would lead to their ability to consistently form the syntax at the "stage 5" level, i.e., with subject-verb inversion (whether accurate or inaccurate). Findings from the study confirm that, as Hypothesis 2 stated, both groups would improve quantitatively, but that the non-proficient group would remain at the same developmental stage as during the pretest, unable to consistently form WH questions with subject-verb inversion.

Conclusions

Because the study's findings indicate that there had been no improvement by the proficient group regarding the grammatical accuracy of orally produced WH questions, further investigation on this subject may be useful. Although the proficient group had already been assessed as being at the developmental stage at which consistent subject-verb inversion takes place in WH questions,

samples containing the following grammatical errors as shown below were still common on the posttest;

"Where do you lived as a child?"

"What day are you take your trip?"

"What car do you used?"

The failure to increase the grammatical accuracy is probably due more to the type of instruction than to the relatively small amount of time (eight sessions of one half hour, or four hours).

Findings did indicate, however, that there was a significant increase in the quantity of spontaneous questions formed on the posttest by the proficient group. The non-proficient group also increased production in this category, although the chi square test did not indicate a significant increase, perhaps in part due to the small number of subjects in the group (five). Results indicate that the type of instruction used in this study, namely focus-on-form combined with an adapted communicative approach, was effective in enabling subjects to increase their oral output of syntactical structures that they had already acquired.

Educational Implications

ESL instructors who are intent on ensuring that their students' oral proficiency does not lag behind their performance on written assessments should be reassured that classroom activities can be beneficial in overall communicative competence. Finding material to which adult ESL students can relate proved quite easy for this study; if students' oral proficiency in producing WH questions presents unique, "diagnostic" problems (instructors may erroneously assume that students have no questions because none are being asked), classroom practices focusing on facilitating oral production of these interrogatives also have their advantages - students immediately found their instructional content both meaningful and purposeful.

ESL students do not need to be persuaded about the importance of acquiring oral proficiency in forming WH questions. Even those who are able to produce these interrogatives orally, under "ideal" conditions, have often had the frustrating experience of not being able to find the "right" words when needing to ask a question. A carefully designed sequence of lessons, allowing for some "fine tuning" from the students, can prepare ESL learners for situations and

opportunities outside the classroom.

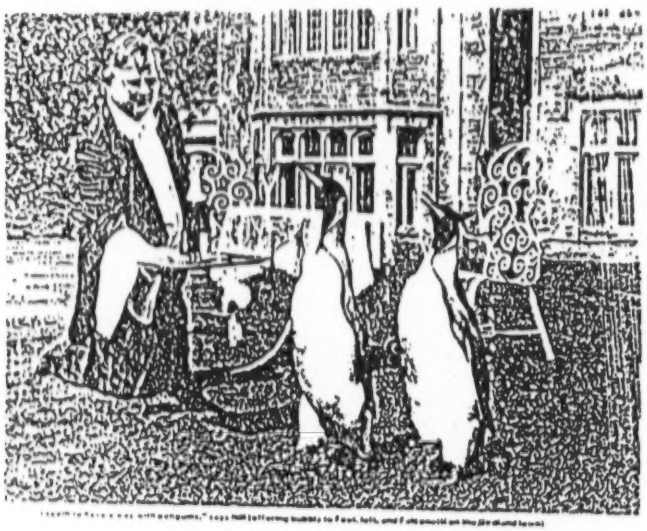
Although the subjects in the study were encouraged to practice their question-forming ability as much as possible, certain "caveats" regarding cultural considerations were presented; the native Russian speakers were made aware that, due to the intonation patterns of their first language (there is no rise in pitch at the end of Russian interrogatives) listeners may mistake a question as a demand for information. The students in this study were informed that certain questions are not deemed as "polite" in American society (e.g., questions regarding an acquaintance's salary). All the students were advised that, if there is ever the possibility that a questions may be taken as "rudely" posed, a "please" before or after the utterance can help. Considerations such as these can help to eliminate any misunderstandings that may develop in the learner's oral production of WH questions, as well as rendering the individual more confident that any questions asked will not only be understood, but also quite willingly answered.

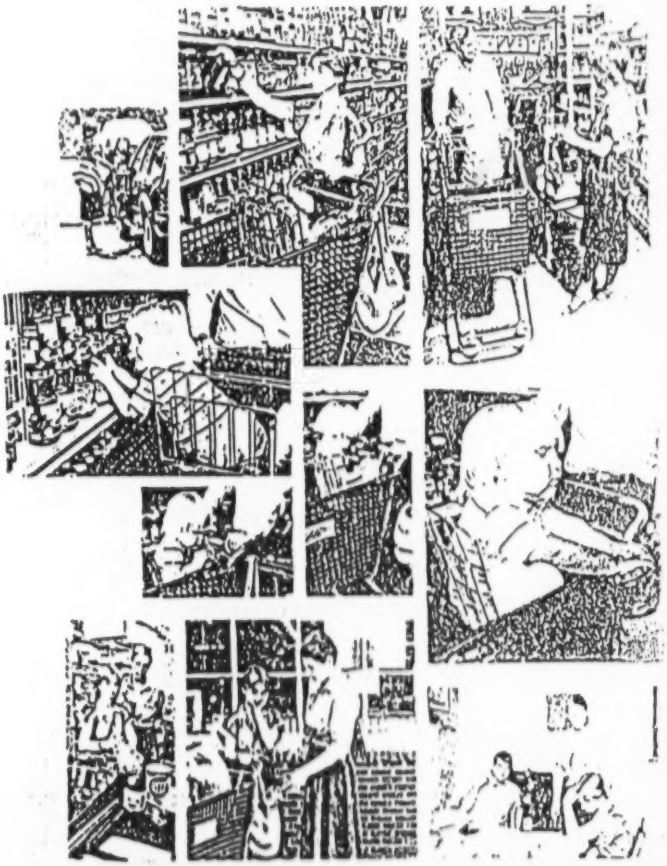
APPENDIX A

Stages in ESL Development

adapted from Tables 3 & 4
from Pienemann et al., (1988)
(punctuation in examples as original)

	STAGE	EXAMPLE
1	Single Words	"yes", "in vietnam"
	Formulae	"my name is X"
2	SVO (Subject Verb Object)	"I eat rice"
	SVO? (yes/no question)	"You like Chinese food?"
3	DO-FRONT (yes/no question)	"Do you understand me?"
	"don't" + V (V = Verb)	"I don't remember"
4	PSEUDO-INVERSION (WH + "be")	"Where is my purse?"
	Verb "to" Verb	"I want to go".
5	AUX-2ND (WH question)	"Where can he go?"
	ADVERB-ly	"I did it easily."
6	Q-TAG (tag question)	"he's Polish, isn't he?"
	ADV-VP (adverb + verb phrase)	"I can always go"





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APPENDIX C

"List of Personalities"

****
****

a. FIDEL CASTRO

b. O. J. SIMPSON (mug shot)

c. NELSON MANDELA

d. BILL CLINTON (unconventional pose, selling SPAM from under trenchcoat)

e. AL GORE

f. MADELEINE STOWE (actress)

g. JOHN F. KENNEDY, JR.

h. HEATHER LOCKLEAR (actress)

i. PAUL NEWMAN

j. TOM CRUISE (actor)

k. JOHN ANDERSON (country music singer in cowboy hat; selected for those subjects wanting to interview "cowboy-like" figure)

l. BORIS YELTSIN

APPENDIX D

"Prompts" on cue cards provided for all photographs:

"We need to know.....

1. ....your father's name."
2. ....the books you read."
3. ....the kind of food you like."
4. ....your favorite actor."
5. ....the time you get up in the morning."
6. ....the day you are taking your trip."
7. ....the place you lived as a child."
8. ....the reason you are always so happy."
9. ....the size of your family."

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